

April 2, 2012

Voter education and Fair Voting, participatory democracy and Authoritarians

I spend a lot of time writing stuff to Fair Vote Canada. Here is some more. It is on one of their side lists, which is supposed to be specifically about voter education. They have some invitations to speak at school civics classes and they are discussing and putting together a lesson plan.

Unfortunately, a lot of what gets talked about on the other FVC lists gets moved over here. There is always some mother's basement genius with some idea that he will not get over. Lately it has been another one of these guys who will not accept that exact proportionality is not the point; it is not about the rights of parties, but the rights of voters.

Well, since the deadline to say something about this lesson plan for civics classes on PR is Wednesday, I better get my bit in. Generally it seems to me like a pretty good plan, although I can't open the slide presentation. My concern with it is that you would not have enough time to get through it in fifty minutes.

If I have to pick about something, it is talking about direct democracy but not participatory democracy. Direct democracy is a bit of a delusion. It amounts to referendums and you can see what kind of messes these are in the United States.

A proper referendum has to start with a citizen's committee to study the issue and make recommendations to put to the electorate. Then you have to have properly enforced campaigning rules which prevent special interests from trying to influence the vote by third party advocacy. There should be a "yes" committee and a "no" committee, each funded equally by the electoral commission, and everybody else shuts up.

But this idea of a citizen's commission or assembly brings us to the idea that Fair Vote people still are not very aware of. It is becoming popular in many

parts of the world. That is, participatory democracy, participatory budgeting, participatory planning.

This is sometimes called the "Porto Alegre" movement after a city in Brazil. That is, simply, local government based on neighborhood councils that everyone participates in. From these local councils for areas small enough for everyone to come together, delegates go to regional councils where budgets are apportioned between the neighborhoods. There are attempts in some places to get this working at a state and national level.

The rule with participation is that there are no majority votes. Things are passed by consensus. That is the next level to the evolution of democracy after going from majority representation to proportional representation. Canada is still working on proportional representation and still has few clues about direct and participatory democracy.

This is what I would like to see Fair Vote's materials about voting reform focus more on; not just voting but the backwardness of our institutions in the 21st century. Voting reform is the start to further reforms but it is not the end of the "democracy deficit" problem. Fair Vote needs to ask people why no one is looking at how things are done in other countries, why everyone seems to think that what we have is all there can be.

Above all, I wish Fair Vote people would stop prescribing for everyone what the voting system should be. It is not Fair Vote's right and it is not our job. I want to see a focus on the process of voting reform; how a referendum can be done properly and without interference from opponents. Also, some study of who the opponents are and their motivations.

Finally, I should say something about this problem of the rights of parties versus the rights of voters. These people who talk about exact proportionality being the point, in order to make elections fair for parties, really do offend me. This is the authoritarian mentality; that institutions demand respect just by existing, and people exist only to serve institutions.

No, institutions exist to meet the needs of people or they should not exist. They come into existence and go out of existence according to the needs of the people they serve. This includes political parties. In the same way in

which business corporations ought to exist only to organize the capital of the people invested in them, political parties ought to exist only to organize the interests of the people who support them.

It is worth noting here that the main socially progressive party in Canadian politics is actually the most authoritarian in this way. It takes its support base the most for granted. Its cadres are the most determined to control everything "social", with a "you have to align with 'the party' or you are bad" mentality that makes it very hard to organize any kind of independent social movement.

So, go teach the class. Let us know how the kids reacted to it. Use this experience as a test run to refine the approach. When you have delivered it several times and have got fairly smooth with it, make a DVD out of it and make it available to classes all across the country. Go to it!

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